Voices
for Vermont's Children

a Vermont
KIDS COUNT
Issue Brief

Homeless in Vermont: Children, Youth and Families

Did you know:

Children represent as many as one-third of the homeless in Vermont?[1]

Vermont had the "tightest rental housing markets in the nation in 2006"?[2]

Nationwide, within 2-4 years of leaving foster care, about one-quarter of youth become homeless?[3]

Much of the growth in homeless families has been at both ends of a spectrum—intact, two-parent, working families and extremely fragile families?[4]

During 2006, 870 homeless children were served by Vermont emergency shelters at some point. This is an urgent issue—children and families are the fastest growing group of homeless people in Vermont and nationwide. All told, people in families now make up half of the homeless population.[5]

Homelessness is often hidden; most families with children are not in shelters. In fact, a large percent of homeless children with families in our communities are invisible, spending a few months or more with one set of relatives or friends while they search for an affordable rental, or until their visit has to end and they double-up with another family.

Many parents and children do not reveal that they and their children are homeless; they want to avoid the embarrassment and stigma that come with the label. Some families also fear their children will be taken from them.

Because of this, there is no way to be able to know the true number of homeless people, including children with families. There are fewer family shelters than adult shelters, so a smaller proportion of children are able to access emergency shelter than adults. That means children are a higher percentage of all homeless people than is indicated in the table below.

In the one-night December 2006 Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) homeless count, 35% were children; in the one-night January 2007 homeless count conducted by Housing and Urban Development in Vermont, about 31% percent were children.[6] The OEO count also found that 56 percent of homeless children were under age six.

What is homelessness?

Definitions of "homelessness" often reflect the priorities of a funding agency. And definitions drive who is counted as homeless and who receives services. For this report, we use the definition of homeless children and youth in the McKinney-Vento Act.

Who gets counted?

The federal agency of **Housing and Urban Development uses a limited definition,** which includes unsheltered people living on the street or in inhabitable housing, people in shelters, including domestic violence victims with not alternate housing, and those in transitional or supported housing.

The Education Department, on the other hand, uses a broader definition in the McKinney-Vento Act, which funds homeless education projects in every state. It includes those who are staying with friends and relatives, or at motels or hotels.

Homeless Vermonters served by emergency shelters

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Total	4,897	4,510	4,380	3,940	3,779	3,898	3,880
Families	429	433	391	416	451	435	452
Children	1,037	1,077	914	993	993	767	870
Avg stay	12.9	22.9	15.2	22.0	26.5	26.0	25.0

Annual Fiscal Year counts, Vermont Office of Economic Opportunity.[7]

As affordable housing becomes harder to to find, shelter stays have become longer, meaning fewer people are able to be served annually by emergency shelters.

Causes of Homelessness

Economics and affordability

One of the key causes of homelessness is the lack of affordable housing. Affordable housing is defined as housing costs that total no more than 30% of household income.

- In 2006, Vermont had the lowest rental vacancy rate in the nation—3.6%—and the third-lowest homeownership vacancy rate, 1.2%.[8]

Many families are one financial disaster away from homelessness—because of a job layoff, loss of health insurance, catastrophic medical costs, workplace injury, or loss of transportation to work.

- In 2006, nearly half of Vermont renters couldn't afford the fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment of $797, which would require an hourly wage of $15.34. The average Vermont wage was only $9.87 per hour. The same apartment in Chittenden, Franklin and Grand Isle counties would cost $983 per month, requiring an hourly wage of $18.90 per hour.[9]

Where do homeless families live?

- At an emergency or transitional homeless shelter. Or a shelter for domestic violence victims.
- In a low-cost motel or hotel.
- They may be part of the "Hidden homeless," staying with a relative or friend, sleeping on a spare couch, bed, or the floor. Often referred to as "couch-surfing" or "doubling up," this is a common refuge for homeless rural families, who have little access to emergency shelters.

In a 2007 one-night survey, 33% of 584 homeless children counted were considered "hidden homeless."[10] The Vermont Department of Education found that, the 2005 school year, 45% of homeless children enrolled in public schools lived in this situation.[11]

- Rural families also may resort to living in an abandoned building or trailer; in a car, tent or camper—at a campground, the woods, a driveway, or parking lot.

Economics and family violence

Domestic violence is another significant cause of homelessness. Most homeless families in this situation are mothers with young children. The woman will often stay in the violent relationship because she has no housing alternative. Isolated by her abuser, she "will often have little or no access to money and very few friends or family members to rely on if she flees a violent relationship."[12]

- Nearly 50 percent of people at Vermont domestic violence shelters were children in 2006.[13] Nationwide research has found that many homeless mothers were abused as children, and later experienced violent partner relationships. One study found that 92% of homeless women had experienced severe physical or sexual assault at some point in their life.[14]

Family Instability

Family instability from mental illness, emotional problems, substance abuse, and other issues add an additional set of risk factors to the financial causes of homelessness.

- **One lesser-known problem is the abandonment of children by a parent,** with no plans by the parent or parents to return. The Vermont Homeless Children and Youth Project (VHCYP) has found that the situation often will not be discovered until the fall, during school enrollment.[15] Children of all ages have been left with noncustodial relatives, boyfriends or friends, sometimes in unsafe environments.
- Since it began five years ago, VHCYP has seen growing numbers of highly fragmented families. Their homelessness is due to multiple complex problems, often including heroin and other hard drug use. Families in this situation are rapidly spiraling down, without a safety net of relatives or friends, or having burned all their bridges. Their children are especially at risk for severe problems and extended homelessness. These families often are not allowed to access federally subsidized rental housing and some emergency shelters because of a poor housing history and/or criminal background.[16]
- **Many of these homeless families with children are considered "hard to house."** "Hard to House" includes people whose income cannot meet basic needs, "have bad credit or rental histories, mental health and/or substance abuse issues, criminal records, lack transportation, experienced domestic violence, or are youths between the ages of 16-21..."[17] A group of Vermont housing and human services providers has been developing strategies to respond to this issue.

Homeless Youth

Youth under age 18 often become homeless for different reasons than those of younger children. Some run away to escape abuse, family conflict, or parents who abuse alcohol or drugs. Or they may have been kicked out because of severe communication problems, youth violent behavior, or substance abuse. Some are rejected because of their sexual orientation. Other youth become homeless following a change in family structure—when a parent who remarries plans to move away, some older youth remain in their hometown because of conflicts with the new step-parent or to finish high school locally.

Homeless Youth

- In Fiscal Year 2005, 251 youth ages 16-21 were served by Transitional Living Programs (TLP), which provide long-term housing and services for runaway and homeless youth. Of that number, 73%, or 183, were homeless at the time they started the program; when services were completed, only about 3% remained homeless.[18] In 2005, 42 or 17% of youth entering TLP had "aged out" of foster care. In fact, a total of 52 or 27% overall had past or current involvement in state custody.
- **Among the youth most at risk of becoming homeless are those in state custody.** For most youth, state custody and related services end at age 18, when they're on their own—also known as "aging out of custody." They lack the kinds of supports that their peers get from family members to help them start living independently—a home base, help with college costs, initial rent deposits, utilities, and other expenses. This situation may improve as a result of 2007 state legislation that extends services to young people between the ages of 18 and 22 years, who turned 18 while in the custody of the state or were in custody for at least five years between the ages of 10 and 18 years and who elect to continue receiving services.
- **Between October 2006 and March 2007, youth agencies providing runaway and homeless services reported an increase in youth who were pregnant or parenting teens.** Also during that period, agencies reported an increase in youth with developmental or emotional disabilities. Service providers felt they did not have appropriate supports for these youth, who included those who had aged out of mental health services, but who were not eligible for adult services.

Impact of Homelessness

The youngest and the oldest homeless children are most likely to miss out on an education. Federal funds do not pay for preschool; therefore, few receive early childhood education. Youth who are homeless and on their own are more likely to fall through the cracks in completing high school; most live temporarily with friends, their educational needs unseen.

- Overall, children and youth experience anxiety and depression from having to adjust to a new living situation, a new school, loss of friends. Many also have suffered trauma from a violent home environment.
- Homeless children experience poorer health, and are at greater risk for illnesses because they tend to live in less healthy housing, are exposed to more unsafe conditions, do not have access to regular meals, and are less likely to have access to health care.

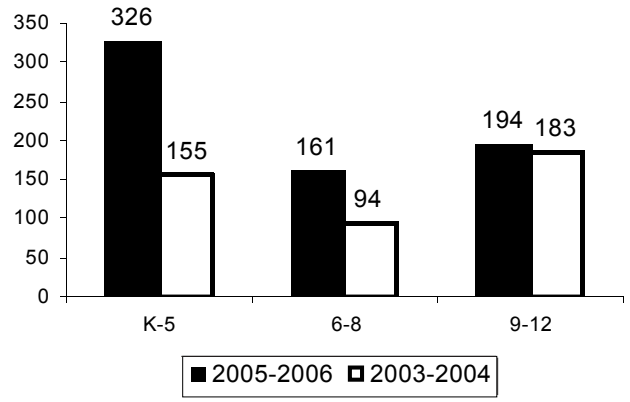
Children's education suffers

- Homeless children are more likely to move at least once during the school year. According to some estimates, for every move to a different school, a child loses 3-6 months of education.[19] School children dealing with ongoing stress, insecurity, and trauma are more likely to be behind academically, and, not surprisingly, may have behavioral problems and developmental delays.
- Vermont students who experienced high mobility due to any cause, "performed 3-10 percentile ranks lower than their stable counterparts did across grade levels and content areas." according to research conducted at UVM.[20]
- Most youth ages 16-21 entering Transitional Living Programs had completed high school (104 or 56%) or were still in high school (26 or 14%). Another 55 or 30% had dropped out; but of those, 21 were taking steps to get their GED. Of those who had completed high school, 14% received GEDs and 30% had received diplomas. Another 14% were in college or technical school; 9% were applying to college.[21]
- Vermont has made significant progress in enrolling homeless kids in public school. District-based local education liaisons carry out the mandates of the McKinney-Vento Law, which requires equal educational access, including a child's right to attend school in her or his hometown district, even if she or he had to move away.

What homeless children need most of all is a home. While they are experiencing homelessness, however, children desperately need to remain in school. School is one of the few stable, secure places in the lives of homeless children and youth—a place where they can acquire the skills needed to help them escape poverty.

National Coalition for the Homeless

Enrollment of homeless public school students



Source: See Endnote 17.

Endnotes

1 Vermont Office of Economic Security (OEO), Department of Children and Families. 2006 Fiscal Year data of people served by emergency shelters.

2 National Low-Income Housing Coalition. (2006) Out of Reach Report, www.nlihc.org

3 The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2005) State Profiles of Child Well-Being 2005 KIDS COUNT Data Book.

4 Conversation with Diane Janukajtis, Vermont Homeless Children and Youth Project. April 2007.

5 2006 One-Night Census. Vt. OEO.

6 2006 Vt. OEO One-Night Census. Vermont State Housing Authority (January 25, 2007) Overview of One-Night Homeless Census. (Calculations of percent of children, by type of homelessness, by Voices for Vermont's Children.)

7 Angus Chaney, Vt. OEO. Table based on Fiscal Year Census data, 2000-2006.

8 Vermont Housing Council and the Vermont Housing Awareness Campaign, Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Housing and Wages in Vermont. March 2007.

9 2006 Out of Reach Report, National Low-Income Housing Coalition.

10 Vermont State Housing Authority (January 25, 2007) Overview of One-Night Homeless Census.

11 Data obtained from Wendy Ross, Vermont Department of Education, Education for Vermont Homeless Children and Youth, for submission to Federal Department of Education; and from Report to the President and Congress On the Implementation of the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program Under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. www.ed.gov/programs/ homeless/rpt2006.doc

12 ACLU Women's Rights Project. Domestic Violence and Homelessness. (No date)

13 A. Chaney, Vt. OEO. 2006 One-Night Census.

14 Ellen Bassuk, et al. (1996) The Characteristics and Needs of Sheltered Homeless and Low-Income Housed Mothers. Journal of the American Medical Association, 276. In R. Rosenbheck, E. Bassuk, and A. Salomon. (No Date) Special Populations of Homeless Americans. Federal Agency of Health and Human Services, Office of The Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. Agency of http://aspe.hhs.gov/progsys/homeless/symposium/2-Spclpop.htm

15 Conversation with Diane Janukajtis, Vermont Homeless Children and Youth Project. April 2007.

16 Regarding prohibition of access to certain rental and emergency housing, conversation with Mary Feeney, Shelter Manager, The Upper Valley Haven, White River Junction. August 2006.

17 Brown, Buckley, & Tucker. (November 2006) Supportive Housing for the "Hard to House." Goal statement and strategies developed by the Hard to House Group. Vermont. Downloaded from www.helpingtohouse.org/resources.php.

18 Kathy Mai, Vermont Coalition of Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs.

19 National Coalition for the Homeless. (June 2006) Education of Homeless Children. NCH Fact Sheet # 10.

20 Ann M. Morgan, Et al. (2006) Mobile Students: A Challenge for Accountability. University of Vermont. (Unpublished April 10, 2006 presentation.)

21 K. Mai, Vermont Coalition of Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs.

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